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ABSTRACT

The social psychology literature largely ignores attribution patterns made by both sexes of differing generations on an activity with salience for both sexes. "Parenting" is an activity with such salience. In estimating parental success for stimulus situations involving parent-child interactions, undergraduates and their parents were virtually identical. With respect to parental failure, the data suggest that some of the gender-related attribution patterns found for other failure situations hold true, and that "generation" is an important variable to consider in analyzing attribution patterns. Parents, in contrast to their children, tended to avoid explaining parental failure in terms of disqualifying factors such as an unhappy childhood, poor health, and inadequate education. Males of both generations made substantially more use of the factor "Child's Fault" as an explanation of parental failure. Females were more inclined to explain failure in terms of bad luck than were their male counterparts. (Author/CS)

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GENERATION AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF PARENTING PERFORMANCE

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GENERATION AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CAUSAL ATTRIBUTIONS OF PARENTING PERFORMANCE

The model that Bernard Weiner and his associates (1972a, 1972b) have developed for analyzing causal attributions in achievement situations along an internal/external dimension and a fixed/variable dimension has been used extensively to document differences between the sexes in what is perceived to determine their performance. There is evidence that male success is more likely to be attributed to the internal-fixed factor of ability than female success is by both actors and observers. Female failure, on the other hand, is more likely to be linked to lack of ability than is male failure; the latter is more likely to be attributed to deficits in the variable and/or external factors usually invoked to explain female success--effort and luck (Nicholls, 1975; Feather & Simon, 1975; Etaugh & Brown, 1975). What is lacking in the literature is research on the attribution patterns made by both females and males of different generations on an activity with salience for both sexes. Indeed, social psychology has generally ignored age and cohort differences.

Parenting was the activity chosen for scrutiny in this study because Mednick and her associates (1975) mentioned it as an obvious--albeit neglected--achievement area. Veroff and Field (1970) found that being a successful parent is considered to be an accomplishment for both sexes. Taking care of and understanding children have been seen as requiring the same intellectual ability as the knowledge required to appreciate literature, music, and art or that necessary to hold a job (Scanzoni, 1975, p. 56). Therefore, parenting is an activity with salience for both sexes which calls for skills comparable to those demanded by other achievement situation tests of the Weiner model.

Procedures

One hundred thirty-six female and 136 male undergraduates without parenting experience were randomly assigned one of eight summaries of parent-child interactions, 4 successful and 4 unsuccessful, which were further varied in terms of the sex of each of the principals. Of the 208 undergraduates who were willing to send the same parent-child story that they had read home to their same-sex parents, 87 mothers and 52 fathers returned the questionnaire. This study compares the responses of 139 undergraduates whose mean age was 18.1 years, with those of their same-sex parents ($\underline{M}$=46.5 years). That is, a factorial between-subjects experiment was conducted with generation, sex of respondent, level of success, sex of stimulus parent, and sex of stimulus child as the independent variables.

The portrait of the successful parent emphasized the nurturant-authoritative qualities described by Baumrind (1967) as being characteristic of the parents of energetic-friendly preschoolers, while the unsuccessful parent displayed the authoritarian-nonsupportive behaviors she linked with conflicted-irritable preschoolers. That the stories constructed to portray success or failure did do just that was demonstrated in pretesting. On a nine-point scale, pilot-study subjects awarded the successful parent an average rating of 8.33, while the unsuccessful parent received a rating of 2.09.

Since Frieze (1976) noted that Weiner's four standard causal attributions (ability, effort, luck, and task difficulty) might account for only half of the open-ended responses proffered to explain success/failure, pilot work also done to generate a list of factors capable of explaining parenting performance. A list of 22 factors was generated; the odd-numbered items were all internal to the parent, while the even-numbered ones were all external to the parent.

Factor analysis was used to reduce the success/failure attributions to their more basic components. Exact factor scores were then calculated for all of those factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0 using a formula (Kim, 1975, p. 489) which includes a weighted term for each variable in the factor. This method provides estimates of each factor that are then orthogonal to each other. Analysis of variance was performed on each of the resulting factor scores.

Results

In their estimates of success on a seven-point scale, the ratings of the undergraduates ($\underline{M}$=6.43) and those of their parents ($\underline{M}$=6.39) were virtually identical.

When the 22 attributions explaining success were factor analyzed, five factors emerged. The first factor was named Specific Situation; observer bias, luck that day, parental effort that day, the child's effort that day, observer influence, and the fact that it was a weekend all loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated Intrinsic Qualities because ability, generally putting effort into the relationship, having good instincts, educational preparation, and loving the child loaded especially highly on this factor. The third factor was called Luck With Children; generally having luck relating to children, having an easy child, and the fact that children are easy to handle were the attributions that were most prominent in the composition of this factor. The fourth factor was named State of Well-Being because it was shaped most by the attributions of feeling physically well, being in a good mood, being relaxed about other things, having a good personality, and the fact that it was a weekend. Finally, the fifth factor was designated Good Family Relations because the attributions that loaded most highly on it were that the child loves the parent, that the parent has a

helpful spouse, and that the parent had a happy childhood.

As can be seen in Table 1, there were no main effect differences in the

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Insert Table 1 about here

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attributions selected to explain success. More use was made of the factor Specific Situation to account for success in cross-sex pairings than in interactions featuring either a father-son or mother-daughter combination. Regardless of generation, females made significantly more use of Good Family Relations as an explanation for success if the story featured a mother than they did when a father was featured. The only significant interaction effect which involved generation was in the use of the factor State of Well-Being. Females in the older generation were more inclined to explain a father's success in those terms, whereas males in the younger generation were less inclined to explain a mother's success in those terms.

Though the rating differences were not statistically significant, those who already were parents ($\underline{M}$=2.03) tended to view the failure story as more successful than their own inexperienced children ($\underline{M}$=1.75) did.

When the 22 attributions explaining failure were factor analyzed, seven factors emerged. The first factor was named Child's Fault; having a difficult child, the child not loving the parent, children generally being difficult, and the child not making an effort that day all loaded very highly on this factor. The second factor was designated Intrinsic Qualities because lack of ability, generally not putting effort into the relationship, generally having bad luck with children, having bad instincts, and a poor personality loaded especially highly on this factor. The third factor was called Contingent Factors; being in a bad mood, having an unhelpful spouse, the pressure of other things, and the fact that it was a weekend were most prominent in

the composition of this factor. The fourth factor was named Poor Family Relations because it was shaped most by the attributions of the child not loving the parent, the parent having an unhelpful spouse, the parent not loving the child, and the parent having had an unhappy childhood. The fifth factor was designated Disqualifying Factors because poor health, little experience, inadequate educational preparation, and an unhappy childhood were the most prominent attributions. General bad luck and bad luck that day loaded especially highly on the sixth factor, so it was designated Bad Luck. The two attributions that involved the observer's presence loaded especially highly on the seventh factor, so it was called Observer Influence.

As can be seen in Table 2, there were several main effect differences

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Insert Table 2 about here

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for failure. The undergraduates made substantially greater use of Disqualifying Factors an an explanation for failure than did their parents. Regardless of generation, males made substantially greater use of Child's Fault than did th females as an explanation, whereas females were more inclined to explain failure in terms of Bad Luck than were their male counterparts. Intrinsic Qualities was a factor used more to explain the failure of a father than that of a mother, whereas Poor Family Relations was used more to explain the failure of a mother than that of a father.

Two interaction effects involved generation differences. Males in the older generation were especially likely to explain the failure of a parent with a son as due to Contingent Factors, even though lack of success in same-sex pairings was generally explained less in terms of Contingent Factors than was that of mother-son and father-daughter combinations. Finally, the

older generation was more likely to explain a father's failure in terms of Bad Luck than their own children were.

The data suggest both that some of the gender-related attribution patterns found in other kinds of failure situations hold true in evaluations of parenting, and that generation is an important variable to keep in mind in analyzing attribution patterns. The use of Child's Fault as an explanation for parental failure by males of both generations is in keeping with the research that has found that males make more "egotistical" attributions than females (Rosenfield & Stephan, 1978). The females' use of Bad Luck also demonstrates their inclination to make use of an external/variable explanation on a task where expectations for female performance are higher (Deaux, 1976). Though it is not clear from this study whether the generation differences were due to age, parenting experience, or cohort group differences, the parents' tendency to avoid explaining failure in terms of Disqualifying Factors suggests that they may no longer believe that parental failure is shaped as much by the "textbook" items that their children may be learning about in child psychology courses (e.g., the negative effects of little childcare experience, poor educational preparation, and an unhappy childhood on parenting competency) as their own children do.

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Table 1. F Values for Attributions Explaining Success -- F (1,119)

	Factor Labels				
	I Specific Situation	II Intrinsic Qualities	III Luck With Children	IV State Of Well-Being	V Good Family Relations
Percent of Variance Accounted for by Factor	26.9	12.4	6.9	5.9	4.8
A (Generation)	2.811	.782	.182	3.090	.005
B (Sex of Respondent)	2.364	.966	.017	1.413	.258
C (Sex of Stimulus Parent)	.341	2.362	.155	.014	.000
D (Sex of Stimulus Child)	.896	.294	.746	.963	.110
AB	.000	.492	.185	3.178	.911
AC	.046	.098	1.658	1.582	.976
AD	.183	.741	.399	.172	2.103
BC	1.523	.775	.159	.027	4.792 *
BD	.122	.071	.000	.047	2.681
CD	4.134 *	3.018	.104	.022	.549
ABC	.517	1.369	.156	4.250 *	.552
ABD	3.681	.709	.015	.074	1.038
ACD	.465	.517	.044	.051	.028
BCD	.117	2.696	1.009	.782	1.903
ABCD	.001	.169	3.271	.168	1.258

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

NOTE: 136 cases were processed; 1 case (.7%) was missing data.

Table 2. F Values for Attributions Explaining Failure -- F (1,123)

	Factor Labels						
	I Child's Fault	II Intrinsic Qualities	III Contingent Factors	IV Poor Family Relations	V Disqualifying Factors	VI Bad Luck	VII Observer Influence
Percent of Variance Accounted for by Factor	16.7	12.0	7.8	6.9	5.8	5.2	4.9
A (Generation)	.633	.005	2.224	.370	8.317 **	.284	1.891
B (Sex of Respondent)	12.645 ***	2.264	.157	3.966	.460	4.027 *	.679
C (Sex of Stimulus Parent)	.284	4.294 *	.095	7.758 **	.431	2.720	1.156
D (Sex of Stimulus Child)	.063	.264	1.505	.070	1.742	.709	.085
AB	.867	2.389	.529	2.789	.000	.891	.594
AC	.249	1.001	.326	.807	.149	4.383 *	.004
AD	1.617	2.175	3.338	.011	.189	1.207	.969
BC	.551	.430	2.704	.004	.201	.047	.191
BD	.725	.103	.840	.069	2.425	2.979	.099
CD	.085	.007	4.962 *	2.092	2.052	1.466	.721
ABC	.124	.001	1.456	.315	.211	.002	.098
ABD	1.585	3.111	.620	1.819	.165	2.105	1.576
ACD	.001	.088	4.751 *	3.075	.119	3.201	1.007
BCD	1.908	1.016	1.500	.052	1.665	.474	.800
ABCD	.130	.196	.157	.576	.032	1.314	3.685

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

NOTE: 142 cases were processed; 3(2.1%) were missing data